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RAYMOND ARON A CRITICAL
RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE

1985

Edward A Kolodziej

Program in Arms Control, Disarmament
and International Security
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
330 Davenport Hall
607 South Mathews Street
Urbana, Illinois 61801

Raymond Aron A Critical Retrospective and Prospective*

Rationale for the Symposium

Few intellectuals and political analysts have dominated their times more than Raymond Aron. His death in fall 1983 elicited press notice from around the globe. Aron's writings, covering over fifty years of ceaseless productivity, reached every corner of the world. He was truly a scholar and teacher of global proportions. Often at odds with his contemporaries in Europe, he was perhaps more appreciated, if not always fully understood, by his English-speaking peers in the United States and England than by his French and European colleagues. Yet he was too formidable to be ignored or dismissed by his adversaries and too original and iconoclastic to be cast as the representative of any one school of politics or political analysis.

Aron's death, coming shortly on the heels of the publication of his best-selling memoirs,¹ prompted the editors of the International Studies Quarterly to attempt an evaluation of his contribution to the study and understanding of international relations. This project has several related aims. First of all it seeks to identify some of the principal elements of Aron's work and approach to international politics that merit attention and preservation. Second, the editors sought to present a critical

* As the guest editor of this Aron retrospective, I should like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Terence Hopmann and Robert Kudrle for their unfailing aid and encouragement. Professor Hopmann translated Pierre Hassner's article and was ever diligent and sensitive in capturing the meaning of illusive phrases and in pursuing fugitive citations. Professor Kudrle's persistence and gentle suasion were indispensable in seeing the project to completion.

retrospective rather than a eulogy, which, while well meaning, would have had little lasting value. It seemed important to determine, at least in a preliminary way, what of Aron's work is likely to stand the test of time. It was also felt that Aron, given his dedication to dialectical discourse, would have also preferred a probing retrospective that looked critically and skeptically at his writing.

Three respected scholars in international relations, known to colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic, consented to contribute evaluations. A close reading of the articles by Pierre Hassner, Stanley Hoffmann, and Urs Luterbacher reveals that they do not share the same views about Aron's contribution to the study of politics. Indeed, Professor Luterbacher, while conceding the importance of Aron's earlier philosophical writings, advances the intriguing case that Aron and his contemporaries slowed the development in France of a scientific social science along the model of the physical sciences.

The differences expressed in the following retrospective suggest the third aim of the project, viz., to stir debate about key conceptual and methodological problems in international relations that have not been fully resolved. Aron strove throughout his career to bridge the gulf between the imperatives of disciplinary rigor and the demands of relevance imposed on the practitioner. What could be a better tribute to Aron than to acknowledge his ability, even after his death, to provoke debate about ways to cross that divide.

Even a focused evaluation of Aron's work, confined to his contributions to international relations, must necessarily be partial and circumscribed. First, this corpus is too complex and extensive to admit to

neat categorization or easy summary. It draws on a broad range of disciplines and professions, including history, philosophy, sociology, and economics. These writings speak to varied audiences within different contexts of time and circumstance at several levels of analysis on a wide array of topics of theoretical and applied import. No cursory retrospective could hope to do justice to the man or his work.

Second, in many ways Aron's work is Aron the observer. Aron eschewed a purely academic or scholarly career, although he held a chair professorship in sociology. Since his college years in the 1920s, he was personally engaged in the philosophical and political issues of his time. He was a publicist for the Free French in England and a respected, if controversial, editorialist throughout the postwar period until his death. The title of an extensive interview which he gave in 1981 to two reporters, published shortly before his death under the title of The Committed Observer,² captured his life as an action-oriented writer and scholar. His life as a critic and editorialist was, as Pierre Hassner suggests, one with his scholarly work and philosophical disposition. Read as a whole, even works which Aron felt were of a lesser theoretical interest and importance, like The Great Schism and The Century of Total War, assume considerable stature as keys to his philosophy of history and his understanding of the principal sources of interstate conflicts. These commentaries as well as a host of seemingly time-bound and time-urgent studies furnished a vehicle for theoretical lucidity and insight, qualities that, as Hassner argues, tended to escape Aron in those works, like The Introduction to the Philosophy of History, which Aron expressly cast in theoretical terms. It is not surprising then that those critics who hold

him to a rigorous scholarly test, as Urs Luterbacher does below find many of the same weaknesses in Aron's disciplinary writing that Aron himself was ready to concede -- but perhaps too quickly if Hassner is right

Third, and aside from obvious space limitations, a comprehensive review of Aron's works is beyond the scope of our interest. We are interested primarily in what Aron has to tell us about the study of international relations. Aron almost singlehandedly created this field in postwar France. He separated it from the formal study of history and philosophy and, with the realists, assigned international relations its own object of study: the behavior of soldiers and diplomats as representatives of nation-states which were the principal actors of the emerging global community and, by implication, the proper unit of analysis of the system.

If the only reasons to look again at Aron were simply historical -- as a purported realist theorist and as a leader in French and continental thinking -- a question might well be raised about devoting a symposium, even one of such modest proportions, to him. Several considerations prompt the conclusion that there is more than meets the eye about Aron's contribution to international relations than a narrow reading of only those works, like Peace and War or The Great Debate, which he designated as studies in international relations or nuclear strategy. Aron invariably asked important questions about politics. The essays by Hassner, Hoffmann and Luterbacher and the divergent views they have about Aron's approach and significance for international relations study provide prima facie evidence of his talent for raising questions of enduring importance. On this point, of Aron as questioner, all three agree that he stood above his peers. What they dispute are his answers -- or, more to the point, his resistance to

closure on the questions he posed. Three are of special concern to students of international relations: the scope of the field, the appropriate methods and concepts of analysis, particularly the claims of international relations as a science, and the role of war, i.e., of force and coercive threats, in establishing an ordered and legitimate international community.

The Scope of International Relations

Aron's attempt at precision in Peace and War is initially misleading as a guide for his conception of international relations. His narrow focus on strategic-diplomatic activity, principally on the persistent threat of war in interstate relations, seemingly placed him squarely in the realist camp. By that token he opened himself immediately to the criticism of traditional liberals, following the teachings of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, David Ricardo, Norman Angell and Woodrow Wilson, who deplored power politics both as an adequate description and explanation of human progress and as a guide for state policy. They imputed to industrialization and modernization a progressive economic interdependence among people across state frontiers that, if left unmolested by war or what were perceived as outdated dynastic or imperialistic struggles for hegemony, would usher in an era of peace and prosperity. Aron's thinking also stood apart from present-day functionalists, like David Mitrany or neo-functionalists like Joseph Nye, who, while sensitive to power considerations, prefer to emphasize the cooperative and non-lethal competitive features of international relations as the dominant characteristics and future tendencies of the system.

Aron's seeming realist position, not unlike those of liberal counterparts, also took issue with Marxist-Leninist presumptions about the deterministic implications of the modes of economic production, the political dominance of those groups in control of these productive means, and the inevitable class struggle arising from a globalized commerce and industrialization, initially under the direction of a small group of capitalists. A Marxist-Leninist persuasion views international relations as a clash of classes, not states. Its core is class conflict in which the state is the object, not subject, of the struggle. The state is the principal coercive instrument of capitalists seeking to maintain their power within each nation and the preferred instrument by which to conduct their global competition, resulting in the spread of imperialism and in the outbreak of global war.

What Hassner and Hoffmann make clear is Aron's broad conception of the scope of international relations, one must look beyond Aron's formal writings on international relations to appreciate his emphasis on strategic-diplomatic behavior as a point of departure and not as an end point for a more elaborate and inclusive understanding of interstate relations. It was a critical starting point since a regime of power, based on organized violence, established a provisional order for the system. It did not follow from this assumption that socio-economic forces and ideology were irrelevant or could be disregarded in any attempt to describe accurately or to explain fully the behavior of the soldier or the diplomat and the outcomes of state power struggles. Aron's quarrel with liberals, functionalists, and Marxists and their contemporary offsprings is not over the significance for interstate conflict and cooperation of new means to

produce wealth or of scientific discovery and technological innovation as complements of man's genius for tool making and fabrication. Aron understands these varied features of man's striving as efforts to control and refashion physical nature -- and himself in the process. If the admittedly sprawling, uncodified, and unsystematic character of Aron's works is viewed for thematic unity as a whole, it is clear that these economic material factors, broadly conceived, enjoy a critical place in Aron's analysis of interstate relations. In this regard, he breaks ranks with realist thinkers whose inclination to reduce everything to a power is as exasperating to serious analysis as is the penchant of Marxists to explain war, imperialism, authoritarian rule, and alienation solely in economic terms.

For Aron, as Hassner makes clear, world politics is framed by three, independently evolving systemic, i.e. community-wide, processes of change: the traditional strategic-diplomatic struggle of states, the industrialization of the world system, and the rise of new secular religions claiming universal validity and demanding unswerving allegiance. These processes form three separate logics driving the relations of states. Economic activity, however important, does not by itself create a regime of power that authoritatively allocates values among peoples and states. In keeping with realist writers (and practitioners like Charles de Gaulle), the state, as a repository and source of legitimate political action and, following Weber and Hobbes, as a monopolist of violence and coercion, is for Aron the central object of study. Its capacity for arbitrating domestic differences and especially its reliance of war to resolve conflicts between polities mark it as the central actor in international

relations. Unlike other realists, however, Aron identified industrialization and interdependent economic activity as separate sources of interstate conduct -- and also of conflict and war. Similarly, he was adamant in underlying the importance of ideology -- defined as secular religions -- as a third process of change. These processes of change often have decisive impact on the agents of the state -- military establishments and foreign offices. On these points he parts company with realists and Marxists and their splinter groups.

His experience with Nazism and Fascism confirmed three underlying assumptions of his theoretical grasp of international relations. While he underscored the appeal to violence as the unique feature of interstate relations, he was equally insistent on the importance of domestic regimes as a critical explanatory variable of international conduct. This key assumption -- a potentially testable proposition after the fashion of Rudolph Rummel's research -- linked the study of comparative politics and international relations. Although Aron never pursued the full implications of this connection, he built a bridge that remains to be crossed by many analysts today whose hesitancy and parochialism slows the potential cross-fertilizations between these sub-disciplines of political science. Again, Aron may well have been his own worst enemy in obscuring this connection in his conscious writing on international relations which was explicated in the larger corpus of his work. In distinguishing so sharply between domestic and foreign affairs, Aron was not arguing the irrelevance of domestic regimes and ideologies on international relations, as many of his critics are quick to argue. He was instead isolating and accenting the most important and obvious, but still widely overlooked or slighted,

characteristic of interstate rivalry -- war -- while stressing the role of economic conflict and ideology as causes of war

An interest in regimes, prompted by the rise of Hitler's Germany which could neither have been foreseen nor extrapolated from a straightforward realist approach to state conflict, confirmed his commitment to a study of international relations as the study of history (as man's capacity for artful and artificial construction of political forms and rules to order human activity) and, by extension, as the pursuit of moral philosophy (as a search, given birth by the Greeks and sustained by the Enlightenment's faith in reason, for right conduct in public affairs or for the ideal society) What to study in explaining the behavior of states was given by historical actors -- not analysts -- and by the moral framework that paradoxically bound them to their age -- their Weltanschauung -- and opened them to the possibilities, not inevitability, of perfection For Aron, while international relations is certainly a disciplinary study requiring rigorous and systematic analysis, it is something more It should provide reliable knowledge about how men can and should act to create an ordered and legitimate world society while combating those who would qualify, arrest, or destroy an open society, as the expression of human freedom and creativity and as both the precondition and instrument of the pursuit of knowledge about men, their political institutions and their prospects

International Relations as Science and Moral Conduct

Aron's fundamentally moral approach to international relations placed him in good company, with such greats as Emmanuel Kant and Quincy Wright. His refusal to be classified only as a realist raises the second important reason for a close re-examination of Aron. It is here where Stanley Hoffmann and Urs Luterbacher join the issue. Luterbacher argues that Aron was instrumental in turning French and continental attention and energies from the scientific study of international relations. Aron turned away from an emerging scientific approach to political study, symbolized by Antoine Condorcet and Augustin Cournot, for a philosophical stance, putatively shaped decisively by German historians, that precluded need for general principles of explanation of social and political behavior, a logical necessity if one wants to adopt a scientific conception. This same quality is considered a virtue by Hoffmann who contends that Aron taught us the futility of prophecy, the impossibility of grasping the whole of reality, the role of events and accidents. Who is right and why should we care?

Hassner provide a preliminary answer. His analysis of Aron's writing also exposes dimensions of the scientific-humanistic debate in Aron's thinking that merit further study and reflection. On the one hand, Aron as Hassner suggests, was no less interested than any social scientist in generalization. What distinguishes him from his contemporaries is the sweep and comprehensiveness of the generalizations he sought. He was not given to simple and narrow hypothesis testing. He had little patience and less interest in a value-free social science. His identification of

independent sources of interstate conflict has by no means been submitted to serious and conclusive analysis. Yet the empirical and normative claims of the current schools of international relations, identified earlier, require the explicit rejection of Aron's position. He refused to choose between history and science or between the engaged scholar and the freedom and independence of reason. He could therefore accept necessity in history -- or at least concede probabilistic causation -- and affirm the fundamentally contingent character of historical experience that is framed, but not determined, by the conjunctural play of global, systemic forces. He may be faulted for not having done enough to show how these forces interact, but he cannot be accused of having ignored them or of having failed to identify them for other students and practitioners.

There is still a deeper level that needs probing: the independence and self-sufficiency of a scientific study of politics and international behavior. Aron's reservations are three-fold. For Aron, a philosophy of social science, patterned after the physical sciences, could not justify itself since it rested on value-free assumptions. This epistemological weakness might well be dismissed, as it tends to be in Anglo-American scholarship, on utilitarian or pragmatic grounds, but for the historical experience of the twentieth century. Aron's second reservation was rooted in the rise of Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, which were enemies of the kind of liberal, democratic society urged by Luterbacher as the precondition for scientific inquiry. According to Aron, liberal societies could not be indifferent to the use of force to protect themselves at home or abroad. This condition was for Aron as much a hypothesis subject to scientific investigation as a guide for action -- praxis in Aron's terms.

Finally, new values, aggressively spread by secular religions (and today by the resurgence of religious fanaticism), limit the possibilities of scientific social science and threaten its independence. The creation of new values, many by no means constructive or favorable to peace, sets social activity apart from physical phenomena and imposes limits on international relations as a purely value-free pursuit.

War and International Relations

Aron's concern with the role of war in international relations also deserves notice. Aron was among the first to recognize the stabilizing impact of nuclear weapons on the superpower balance and its paradoxical de-stabilizing effects on regional conflicts. The heterogeneity of the international system generates sub-systemic rules of conflict and incentives for the threat or use of force that does not conform to the global superpower struggle. Clausewitz, the focus of Aron's mature years of analysis, still had relevance to explain the continued resort to war in revolutionary and interstate conflict despite the existence of nuclear weapons. The decolonization experience and the regional dominance of North Vietnam in Southeast Asia, Israel in the Middle East, and India in South Asia owe much to the successful employment of force. The optimistic assumption of functionalist and neo-functionalist theory, that of the progressive de-militarization of interstate competition, is belied by this experience and the continued expansion of military capabilities and arms production centers around the globe.³

War and the war machine, arising out of industrial development and technological innovation, held a particular fascination for Aron.

Globalized militarism threatened to overwhelm the nation-state struggle as it did temporarily and unexpectedly in World War I. Like Schumpeter, Aron tended to see the rise of a technocratic military elite and bureaucracy as a general phenomena of modernization. The capacity to produce wealth and goods in abundance provided the wherewithal to sustain large and technically proficient military establishments which enjoyed increasing latitude in their impact on societies and on the allocation of resources. World War I demonstrated that states were as much prisoners of the military as the latter was ostensibly an instrument of the state. This condition was not a necessary characteristic of any particular political regime, as a Wilson or Lenin preferred to believe, but a general and ominous feature of contemporary international relations.

The hyperbolic warfare of the twentieth century raised in Aron's mind the need to understand the major forces producing this unanticipated but potentially foreseeable crisis in international relations. In his mind only an international relations of the scope and sweep of the system itself could yield a preliminary diagnosis of the grave ills within the global community that encouraged and unleashed worldwide conflict and devastating warfare. Aron's conception of crisis, therefore, contrasts sharply and fundamentally with much of current literature on the subject. From his broad perspective, the rigorous analyses of crisis decision-making found, say, in Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing's Conflict among Nations⁴ and Graham Allison's Essence of Decision⁵ look at real or potential international crises from the wrong end of the telescope. They are attempting to manage nation-state crises which raise the specter of global conflagration at a point in time when soldiers and diplomats risk being prisoners of events,

and not their masters. The study of crisis must be cast in systemic, not narrow bargaining, terms. While the momentary significance of international crisis, conceived in bargaining terms, cannot be gainsaid, such an approach to international crises obscures the larger structural crises -- most especially the militarization of international relations -- besetting the global system and all national leaders that give rise to eleventh hour bargaining to prevent a calamitous war. A re-reading of Aron promises to refocus our research energies to identify the major sources of conflict inherent within the system as a precondition for devising strategies to manage and resolve them before war appears to be the only way out -- albeit a no exit solution.

Conclusion

Gertrude Stein, shortly before her death, reportedly asked Alice Toklas, her life-long friend, what were the answers to life's riddles. Toklas replied that there were no answers. Stein was supposed to have then rejoined: What are the right questions? In an age of competing certitudes -- ideological, political, strategic and scientific -- Aron never ceased raising questions about belief systems and their evidentiary claims -- and even about the validity of the questions he posed. This habit of mind, first given voice by Socrates in Plato's Republic, animated his concern for explaining why men and political communities behave the way they do and how they might or should act. As students of politics, we owe Aron much for asking the right question, for resisting early closure, and

for keeping the search for better answers open, free, and wide both as a student and practitioner of politics -- always the committed observer

Edward A Kolodziej
University of Illinois